

**Speech**  
**Ambassador Lewis Lukens**

**Opening - Countering Trans-National Threats Workshop**

**Dakar, King Fahd Hotel**  
**May 19, 2014**

*(As prepared)*

Honored guests,

Thank you all for joining us here today. Preventing the growth of transnational threats in the Sahel has been and continues to be a priority for the United States. As I complete my term as Ambassador, I realize that this issue has most consistently led my discussions with our host country partners in the government and security sectors. And we have hosted many training programs that concern this topic as well.

The crisis in Mali is but one example of how a multitude of transnational and irregular threats can produce an enduring, violent event that destabilizes the entire region. In addition, other countries in the Sahel are dealing with similar issues that can quickly spread throughout the region and even around the world. Threats such as drug trafficking, violent extremism, or human smuggling impact multiple nations at once; and they require regional solutions.

As you know, transnational trade is not new in this region, where nomadic populations have existed since before state borders were drawn. Illicit trafficking has built upon these longstanding trade routes and networks, which are also still used for the licit trade of commercial goods. The overlap between Islamist extremist and trafficking groups -- as well as the consistently changing allegiances -- indicate the fluidity of violent threats across the Sahel region. The U.S. is committed to working with governments in the Sahel to eradicate these complex webs of multiple transnational threats that threaten the stability of the region and the world.

For this reason, I am happy to welcome such a distinguished and varied group of security professionals from across the broader Sahel region, stretching from Cameroon to Egypt.

Combatting transnational threats requires full governmental and non-governmental participation. However, members of the security sector like you -- including military, police, border security, customs and others -- are frequently at the frontlines of protecting your countries from non-state armed groups, illicit trafficking, and even the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction. You have an obligation to your fellow citizens and your country to protect them from the many pernicious threats that have developed throughout the region. However, you also have valuable insights about these violent groups that seek to harm the nation and the region. Your valuable input about:

- what is happening on a remote border between two countries,
- how a violent extremist organization is operating,
- or the transportation network used by a drug smuggling ring

is crucial to developing a regional framework to deal with these threats.

I hope you will take this opportunity to discuss the issues you and your countries face with your colleagues from around the region. The specific situations you are engaged in will vary across the region. You can learn a lot from your counterparts in different countries, and this is a valuable opportunity to exchange best practices for dealing with and overcoming transnational threats.

Developing a solution to organized crime, violent extremism and the resulting instability in the Sahel requires a regional approach. Although some of your countries are part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) -- which might provide one mechanism for regional cooperation -- other Sahel states are not part of the West African bloc. It is crucially important, therefore, to take advantage of opportunities that bring together individuals from across the region, to discuss the issues you face, as well as best practices and solutions. I challenge you to take this opportunity to push beyond your specific role or nationality to work with your colleagues to identify some recommendations based on your practical experience. These recommendations can help your governments and the United States counter these vicious transnational threats that continue to thrive in the region. Use the next four days to reflect on what you can do individually to prevent transnational threats in your day to day job, but also take what you learn from the experts who have been invited to speak with you to develop practical recommendations and a common toolkit for countering transnational threats in the Sahel, in order to enhance collective security in the Sahel region.

Thank you in advance for your candid participation in this workshop, and I wish you the best of luck in this challenging but most vital endeavor.